

Chapter 26

'Consideration like an angel came
And whipped the of ending Adam out of her
Leaving her body as a paradise
To envelop and contain celestial spirits.'

SHAKESPEARE: Henry V.

THE next morning, after much prayer for the needful strength and wisdom, Mr Lyon came downstairs with the resolution that another day should not pass without the fulfilment of the task he had laid on himself; but what hour he should choose for his solemn disclosure to Esther, must depend on their mutual occupations. Perhaps he must defer it till they sat up alone together, after Lyddy was gone to bed. But at breakfast Esther said -

'To-day is a holiday, father. My pupils are all going to Duffield to see the wild beasts. What have you got to do to-day? Come, you are eating no breakfast. O, Lyddy, Lyddy, the eggs are hard again. I wish you would not read Alleyne's Alarm before breakfast; it makes you cry and forget the eggs.'

'They are hard, and that's the truth; but there's hearts as are harder, Miss Esther,' said Lyddy.

'I think not,' said Esther. 'This is leathery enough for the heart of the most obdurate Jew. Pray give it little Zachary for a football.'

'Dear, dear, don't you be so light, miss. We may all be dead before night.'

'You speak out of season, my good Lyddy,' said Mr Lyon, wearily; 'depart into the kitchen.'

'What have you got to do to-day, father?' persisted Esther. 'I have a holiday.'

Mr Lyon felt as if this were a fresh summons not to delay. 'I have something of great moment to do, my dear; and since you are not otherwise demanded, I will ask you to come and sit with me up-stairs.'

Esther wondered what there could be on her father's mind more pressing than his morning studies.

She soon knew. Motionless, but mentally stirred as she had never been before, Esther listened to her mother's story, and to the outpouring of her step-father's long-pent-up experience. The rays of the morning sun which fell athwart the books, the sense of the beginning day, had deepened the solemnity more than night would have done. All knowledge which alters our lives penetrates us more when it comes in the early morning: the day that has to be travelled with something new and perhaps for ever sad in its light, is an image of the life that spreads beyond. But at night the time of rest is near.

Mr Lyon regarded his narrative as a confession - as a revelation to this beloved child of his own miserable weakness and error. But to her it seemed a revelation of another sort: her mind seemed suddenly enlarged by a vision of passion and struggle, of delight and renunciation, in the lot of beings who had hitherto been a dull enigma to her. And in the act of unfolding to her that he was not her real father, but had only striven to cherish her as a father, had only longed to be loved as a father, the odd, wayworn, unworldly man became the object of a new sympathy in which Esther felt herself exalted. Perhaps this knowledge would have been less powerful within her, but for the mental preparation that had come during the last two months from her acquaintance with Felix Holt, which had taught her to doubt the infallibility of her own standard, and raised a presentiment of moral depths that were hidden from her.

Esther had taken her place opposite to her father, and had not moved even her clasped hands while he was speaking. But after the long outpouring in which he seemed to lose the sense of everything but the memories he was giving utterance to, he paused a little while and then said timidly -

'This is a late retrieval of a long error, Esther. I make not excuses for myself, for we ought to strive that our affections be rooted in the truth. Nevertheless you -'

Esther had risen, and had glided on to the wooden stool on a level with her father's chair, where he was accustomed to lay books. She wanted to speak, but the floodgates could not be opened for words alone. She threw her arms round the old man's neck and sobbed out with a passionate cry, 'Father, father! forgive me if I have not loved you enough I will - I will!'

The old man's little delicate frame was shaken by a surprise and joy that were almost painful in their intensity. He had been going to ask forgiveness of her who asked it for herself. In that moment of supreme complex emotion one ray of the minister's joy was the thought, 'Surely the work of grace is begun in her - surely here is a heart that the Lord hath touched.'

They sat so, enclasped in silence, while Esther relieved her full heart. When she raised her head, she sat quite still for a minute or two looking fixedly before her, and keeping one little hand in the minister's. Presently she looked at him and said -

'Then you lived like a working man, father; you were very, very poor. Yet my mother had been used to luxury. She was well born - she was a lady.'

'It is true, my dear; it was a poor life that I could give her.'

Mr Lyon answered in utter dimness as to the course Esther's mind was taking. He had anticipated before his disclosure, from his long-standing discernment of tendencies in her which were often the cause of silent grief to him, that the discovery likely to have the keenest interest for her would be that her parents had a higher rank than that of the poor Dissenting preacher; but she had shown that other and better sensibilities were predominant. He rebuked himself now for a hasty and shallow judgment concerning the child's inner life, and waited for new clearness.

'But that must be the best life, father,' said Esther, suddenly rising, with a flush across her paleness, and standing with her head thrown a little backward, as if some illumination had given her a new decision. 'That must be the best life.' 'What life, my dear child?'

'Why, that where one bears and does everything because of some great and strong feeling - so that this and that in one's circumstances don't signify.'

'Yea, verily; but the feeling that should be thus supreme is devotedness to the Divine Will.'

Esther did not speak; her father's words did not fit on to the impressions wrought in her by what he had told her. She sat down again, and said, more quietly -

'Mamma did not speak much of my - first father?'

'Not much, dear. She said he was beautiful to the eye, and good and generous; and that his family was of those who have been long privileged among their fellows. But now I will deliver to you the letters, which, together with a ring and locket, are the only visible memorials she retained of him.'

Mr Lyon reached and delivered to Esther the box containing the relics. 'Take them, and examine them in privacy, my dear. And that I may no more err by concealment, I will tell you some late occurrences that

bear on these memorials, though to my present apprehension doubtfully and confusedly.'

He then narrated to Esther all that had passed between himself and Christian. The possibility - to which Mr Lyon's alarms had pointed - that her real father might still be living, was a new shock. She could not speak about it to her present father, but it was registered in silence as a painful addition to the uncertainties which she suddenly saw hanging over her life.

'I have little confidence in this man's allegations,' Mr Lyon ended. 'I confess his presence and speech are to me as the jarring of metal. He bears the stamp of one who has never conceived aught of more sanctity than the lust of the eye and the pride of life. He hints at some possible inheritance for you, and denounces mysteriously the devices of Mr Jermyn. All this may or may not have a true foundation. But it is not my part to move in this matter save on a clearer showing.

'Certainly not, father,' said Esther, eagerly. A little while ago, these problematic prospects might have set her dreaming pleasantly; but now, for some reasons that she could not have put distinctly into words, they affected her with dread.